

How to Improve Constipation After Stroke

By Julia Schwarz

Constipation is an incredibly common issue among stroke survivors. In fact, over 50% of people who have had a stroke also report constipation. Despite how common constipation following a stroke is, it receives little attention from medical professionals, and very little research has been conducted regarding the issue. This blog post will answer some common questions about constipation after stroke and inform you about the research that has been done on the issue.

Why Is Constipation Common After Stroke?

Constipation is common after stroke, and usually does not have a single cause. Multiple factors, such as lifestyle changes and new medications post-stroke can result in constipation, discomfort, and bloating.

Changes in Lifestyle

When you move around, your gut moves too. This movement is important in allowing you to have a bowel movement. This is why many people will have to use the bathroom when exercising. After a stroke, you may have reduced mobility. If you've become less active due to the effects of your stroke, your gut may not be getting the movement it needs to start a bowel movement. Additionally, a high fiber diet with lots of fluids is also essential in promoting regular bowel movements. Some individuals have difficulty swallowing after a stroke causing many people to decrease their fluid and fiber intake, which can also negatively impact bowel movements. When increasing fluid intake to help digestion, be sure to drink more water instead of sugary soft drinks.

New Medications and Routines

Beyond your activity level and diet, other factors can cause you to become constipated during your recovery process. For instance, after having a stroke, you may start taking medications that affect the gut and cause constipation. Another factor for many people is the increased dependence on aids, friends or family members to use the restroom. This new reliance on others can be awkward for many and lead to constipation.

How Can I Fix It?

The first thing to do is to talk to a doctor or nurse about your constipation. This is an extremely common problem after stroke that can significantly affect your quality of life, so don't be afraid or embarrassed to bring it up. Long term constipation can have serious negative health effects such as hemorrhoids (swollen veins in your anus) and rectal prolapse (collapse of the intestines), so do not hesitate to talk to a medical professional about the issue. One of the most effective interventions that has been studied for improving constipation after stroke is diet modification (1). Studies also show that abdominal massages can improve the number of bowel movements a patient has. This can replace the movement that the gut would normally get when you're moving around. If an abdominal massage sounds impractical or uncomfortable to you, another study found that drinking carbonated water instead of tap water increased the number of bowel movements a patient had (2). Consult your doctor to determine the management option that is best for you!

Sources:

1. S. F. Lim, C. Childs, Effectiveness of Non-Surgical Management Strategies for Constipation in Adults with Stroke: A Systematic Review. JBI Libr Syst Rev 9, 1-26 (2011).
2. M. Coggrave, C. Norton, J. D. Cody, Management of faecal incontinence and constipation in adults with central neurological diseases. Cochrane Database Syst Rev, CD002115 (2014).